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ABSTRACT

Changing from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach and trying to use the principles of critical pedagogy are not enough to teach writing--both male and female students need to go beyond prescribed gender roles and social roles. Some women students in peer response groups act as though they have composed a secret etiquette guide: they tend to give everybody a chance to speak; they express their ideas without interrupting one another; they do not give much elaborated response; and they reach premature closure. Even after students had received careful training and the teacher was removed from the center stage, both male and female students began their work in peer response groups by relying on the communication patterns they have been socialized to use. However, some women students are talkative, involved, and supportive. A case study of one such student indicated that she set the stage for the group, controlled the group process and turn-taking, listened to responses and actively responded to them, and included her real emotional reaction as a legitimate part of the group. Ways in which writing teachers can help all students in response groups include: make subtexts explicit; encourage metalinguistic awareness; put timid women in more supportive groups; work to find creative configurations for male students; and discuss with students the differences between speaking and writing. (Contains 18 references.) (RS)

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Elizabeth Sommers
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4 C's talk
Spring, 1994

Women Collaborators:

Breaking the Rules and Learning How to Win

As I've studied gender patterns in peer response groups through the years, I've started wondering if my most of my women students composed a secret etiquette guide and distributed in among themselves before they ever started working. Here's my idea of the table of contents for this imaginary etiquette book:

Be hyperpolite

Hide the truth if the draft's not very good, staying on the surface.

If the draft is great, jump into the depths, giving everything you've got.

Don't expect that much in return, though.

Hedge. Then hedge some more.

Wait your turn patiently.

Make your turn brief if and when it comes.

Be optimistic, even very optimistic.

In short, help with the text if the writer's in good shape.

And pay a lot of attention to the emotional climate whether or not s/he has a good draft.

Now I'm certainly not giving my women students these rules, but somebody is. What's going on? Why is it happening? Do all women students do this? What can we do as teachers? That's what this talk is about.

First, the bad news. Accommodating women in groups tend to be polite to one another and to give everybody a chance to speak--even if their own turn never comes. They express their ideas without tending to interrupt one another.

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They reassure the writer often and seem optimistic about the draft. They use many statements that include "I think" and "I feel." They don't actually give much elaborated response because they tend to discuss issues only in superficial ways, reaching premature closure, usually telling the writer that her draft is essentially fine even if it needs a lot of work.

While I was unhappy to see these patterns in my students' peer response groups, I wasn't flabbergasted. Many others working on gender, speech and communication patterns have also observed inequality. Dale Spender and other scholars have pointed out that while almost every research study in every context has shown otherwise, women are still perceived as being more talkative than men. We worry about this. It isn't feminine. Gloria Steinem suggests that women stifle our own voices, our own thoughts, trying to avoid feeding into these stereotypical ideas. Ursula LeGuin differentiates between the mother tongue and the father tongue, calling the father tongue patriarchal, powerful--the stuff public discourse is made of--and believes that the mother tongue is devalued as "inferior...coarse, limited, trivial." She invites women to unlearn what we learned in college--that father tongue--but recognizes that until women do, we will be less powerful, even powerless.

We shouldn't be startled that the situation in our classrooms reflects larger cultural patterns. Classroom research has long shown that women talk less than men, that even feminist teachers call on women students less often, that women are more hesitant to speak than men and interrupted more often when we do. Belenky and her colleagues theorize in *Women's Ways of Knowing* that women may need a different way of teaching because women's needs are not met in many college classrooms. Brown and Gilligan suggest that

many young women go underground by adolescence, learning to silence themselves to keep the peace. Pamela Annas writes specifically of silence and the teaching of writing, connecting the issue--which isn't a problem, necessarily--to feminist language research. Power, she points out, may be even more important than the sexism encoded into our language, power "...to name, to speak, and to expect that one's words will be heard and valued."

In *Composing as a Woman*, Flynn pushes the notion of power even further, arguing that "...ultimately questions of difference are questions of power, questions of whose interpretations of reality will prevail and of whose decisions will construct that reality." Flynn urges us to recognize that power has always been unfairly divided between men and women. She urges us to encourage our women students to write "from the power of their experience." I believe we should also encourage our women students to speak and interact from "the power of their own experience" as well. But what if women's talk doesn't sound like academic talk? What if women's interactions don't seem academic?

Now I was aware of many of these issues when I asked students to work in peer response groups, to invent classroom communities. But I was also optimistic, somehow thinking that by training peer response groups carefully, then removing the teacher from the center stage, I might change these patterns, might help women and men students to articulate their own ideas, to formulate their own ways of knowing, to develop their own ways of helping one another.

But as it turned out, both male and female students begin their work in peer response groups by relying on the communication patterns they have been socialized to use, women talking differently from men. This isn't surprising.

After all, college students bring the effects of many years of socialization to our writing classrooms. So of course writers first form classroom communities based on what they already know about language, verbal interaction, power, gender roles. And unless they want to forge a new way--unless we teach them and they want to learn and they're willing to take risks--their classroom communities continue to be based on what they already know about such things.

Now the good news. I'm also finding a second type of woman respondent in peer groups. These women are talkative, involved and supportive. Whether in mixed gender or all women groups, the students are working together for serious reasons: they want to get and give high quality response to their work. They've internalized the audience and purpose for the assignment and decided that collaboration is worth the risks that it brings with it.

Let me exemplify with one writer, Deb. Unlike more accommodating women, Deb makes her own rules as the writer.

(1) First she sets the stage, getting air time for her own work even while negotiating in a playful way with her peers:

Deb: All right. You want me to go first? I'll go first, but...are you sure you want me to go first? Does anyone want to go first?

Madeleine: I want to get mine done today though because I...

Deb: I do too, because I hate it. All right, ready. Can I go fast?

(2) Deb controls the group process and turn-taking in a series of short, highly effective moves. When her peers start to respond before writing in their journals, as they're supposed to do, she stops them:

Deb: Oh, wait, wait...you got /// time to write.

Deb: All right, so Madeleine's starting first, correct?

Deb: [after a lengthy exchange with Madeleine]. All right, wait. We'll talk after because we're not going to have time for someone else's paper.

Deb: Joseph [gives floor to Joseph]

Deb: Can I listen to someone else?

Deb: Thank you [to Joseph]. Your turn [to Sarah]

Deb: [And finally] Let's get off mine...

(3) Deb listens to responses and actively responds to them rather than politely waiting, using a number of strategies:

(1) Elaborating on her intended meaning.

Sarah: Well, then, how did you bring materialism in?

Deb: Materialism? With the good life...I'm just talking about different theories of him...The good life. OK, if I can find it...on the third page, middle paragraph. "This in turn leads to students who care less about learning, more about material success, money, good time, the good life." All right, what I'm saying is, I'm not saying...I'm not outlining the whole thing, I'm just saying, these are different aspects of his like feelings involved. ..

(2) Asking for clarification, help and advice:

Deb: So wait, start it off again. Say you're saying what?

Madeleine: This sentence here, "I realize...as I grew older I realized teachers had separate identities. If you use it close to the beginning you could use...that would right away give you the idea that's what you're going to talk about, that teachers are human beings.

Deb: OK, but you know. That's good. Do you think the way...you

see, all we TALKED about...we talked so much about education and stuff like that, so what should I do about that?

Later:

Deb: Where is that?

Madeleine: Second page.

And later:

Madeleine: If you shortened it there and you expanded more on the things that really counted, like his views in general, not just in education.

Deb: Well, what could I do? Like, I have his views here. What do I do?

Madeleine: Look at it, and jot...just take down on a piece of paper his views about specific things, like things generally, like education.

(3) Rejecting advice she doesn't like:

Madeleine: Try an interview with him again.

Deb: I don't want to.

Sarah: So why don't you focus in on how dedicated he is to what he's doing?

Deb: Well, no.

(4) Deb includes her real emotional reaction as a legitimate part of the group:

Deb: I feel awful tense about this.

Madeleine. Think about it. Just calm down...Don't stress.

Later:

Madeleine: Instead of Professor O. you could say Mr. O. and it would make it look like he's just a guy.

Deb: You're right. That's a good point. [she laughs]. Number 245 teacher.

Deb's respondents, two women and a man, use equally effective strategies, as though they had been given a different rule book from the women I discuss earlier:

The Alternative Secret Etiquette Guide

--Say what you honestly think in elaborated prose.

--Respect the writer's decisions about turn-taking.

--Go beneath the surface (don't even worry about the surface).

--Talk with conviction in a strong voice.

--Expect to get a lot of help and to give a lot of help, too.

--Serve as gatekeeper, inviting more timid peers into the discussion.

--Use humor to balance the seriousness of the situation.

--Pay a lot of attention to the real emotional climate as well as the rhetorical issues.

--Show metalinguistic awareness--of the group, the rhetorical situation, role-playing, the draft.

As a result of active reading, listening and response, the three respondents hone in on the biggest problem in the draft--its lack of focus--helping Deb to brainstorm ways to solve the problem

Deb's Revision:

We still don't know very much about what writers do with peer group response, but these are the spans of the changes Deb made as a direct result of her peer group meeting (and she made more self-sponsored changes, too):

Graphic changes: 1

Lexical changes:	3
Phrasal changes:	6
Clausal changes:	1
Sentence rearrangements	4
Multi-sentence additions	6 (a total of 37 sentences)
Multi-sentence deletions	6 (a total of 34 sentences)

Now this doesn't show the full effect of the revision, of course. But most readers agree the second draft is more focused and more highly developed, with a much clearer sense of audience and purpose. The original draft, "Professor Oronowski," is now entitled "Education at its Worse," a title that encapsulates the new focus: the demise of American education and its consequences.

Classroom Implications:

As a researcher studying their work, I understand these students constructed a remarkably positive and helpful workspace, the kind of space Adrienne Rich tells us to build in "Taking Women Students Seriously"--supportive and rigorous, helpful and critical. And I've figured out some ways to help both male and female students as they negotiate their ways in the context of response groups.

1. Make subtexts explicit. Publish your own students' versions of my two rule books, letting students know in advance what patterns are possible.

2. Encourage metalinguistic awareness in the classroom. Share transcripts of students' talk in their groups. Who talks? Who listens? Why?

3. If students want to work together because they take women students seriously, encourage them. In fact, give them the best chairs in the best corner of the room.

4. When women hide and men crowd the stage, you have a number of choices: (1) put the timid women in more supportive groups; (2) bring your students back to a metalinguistic awareness of process; (3) create rules your students must follow: about turn-taking, length of time per student, writers' and respondents' roles; (4) work to find creative configurations for male students who seem domineering, roles that challenge them as well.

5. Make one of the explicit topics in the classroom the discussion of the differences between speaking and writing. As Heath suggests, students and teachers can and should become ethnographers together, looking at language in context. Study oral classroom language together as well as written texts.

Now you know the answers to some of my questions. Women in peer response groups tend to be more silent than men, at least early in the semester. When they figure out what's going on, they either accept or change the situation. Women who change the situation seem to develop metalinguistic awareness, giving them more authority and more control over their own learning process. They seem to know that learning and teaching are not necessarily teacher-bound, that their writing is their own. They tend to develop their suggestions and comments in much more depth. They tend to take a great many risks, trying not only to connect with the writer but to help her to revise. As Belenky and her colleagues explain, "in connected-knowing groups people utter half-baked half-truths and ask others to nurture them...authority in connected knowledge rests not on power or status or certification but on commonality of experience..."

I want to stress that these patterns seem to hold true for some men as well; they aren't necessarily women's patterns alone, or static patterns. But my study and many others do indicate that women speak differently from men. Women's roles in peer response groups are different, too, and they seem to evolve in different ways. We need to study more, to find out how we can truly empower our students if that's what we want to do. Changing from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach and trying to use the principles of critical pedagogy aren't enough. Individuals in groups seem to need to take a psychological step: They need to be willing to communicate what they know, to go beyond prescribed gender roles and social roles, to take risks, to trust one another's ways of knowing. I see helping them as part of my work as a writing teacher. Do you?

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